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Constructing a University/Public School Partnership: Scholar-Practitioner Pursuits

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Introduction

Building university and public school alliances is certainly not a new and innovative development in the knowledge construction business in the field of education. There is enough literature to support the argument that such relationships are paramount to linking research to student achievement, cultural understandings, urban education, curriculum development, and many other facets of the school day (Fuller and Rosie, 1997; Foleman-Peck, 1997; etc.). Yet, within literature on university and public school partnerships, there seems to be a surprising missing element. While there is a dearth of literature that depicts how university professors work with public school personnel on various curricular and other school issues (Soohoo, 1993; Soohoo and Brown, 1994; Moss et al., 2003; Moss, 2004), there has been a lack of concerted effort by universities and a school district or districts to partner in constructivist knowledge-making over debated national issues in a public forum like a professional journal.

The above said, one should ask this question: Why develop such a space? Should one elaborate on how the much maligned *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) frenzy has left school personnel scurrying for ways to increase scores with less federal and state funding? Or indeed, should teachers teach more to the test so that scores can be fabricated into something called knowledge attained? Many more questions of this sort have been asked (Kohn, 2000). Many others have not been answered, such as: How do we teach a creative curriculum (much like John Dewey envisioned) that talks to students' lives within accountability models that limit knowledge construction?

Here at IPFW and East Allen County Schools in Indiana, we have decided to struggle over how we can better develop a scholar-practitioner framework into a public debate between a university and public school partnership that may address the preceding questions among many others. There are many reasons for this partnership. Of course,

it is important that knowledge construction is made available to teachers to know how to teach better, for researchers to collaborate with teachers in a professional development mode, for teachers and researchers to be collaborative co-researchers, and so on and so forth. But perhaps more importantly, this partnership, formed into a journal space for public debate, seeks to reflexively inform each other on how to better react to, teach in, plan for, and implement knowledge into our systems of operation in a just, caring, democratic, and well-informed and intentioned way. Clearly, there are competing views on what a scholar-practitioner is or could be.[1] We will return to these views after our initial interview. Meanwhile, by way of introduction to this journal, both of us, as a former superintendent of a school district and a dean of a School of Education, invite you to the table to witness our dialogue — after which we will draw some further analytical boundaries for this journal.

Interview

Barry Kanpol: I'm here with Jeffrey Abbott for East Allen County Schools. Could you tell me a little about your district?

Jeffrey Abbott: Yes, we're a little over 10,000 students. We're moderately growing the last several years. We are somewhat of a unique school district in Indiana for sure, if not nationally. The reason is that we are one-third rural, one-third suburban, and one-third urban. In that regard, we are a very unique, culturally diverse school system. We have a high minority count in various parts of our school district.

Barry: And given that your school district is next to the major university in Fort Wayne (Indiana University–Purdue University Fort Wayne), what do you see as the significance of a school-university partnership as we proceed with this journal?

Jeffrey: I think the significance is that modern public education has become a very complex business. It's much more complex with many more demands that society has placed on K–12 schools than in prior generations. We've got a huge economic dilemma in our country going right now, and certainly it's no fault of the public education system, but we are experiencing and have been for the last decade or so a huge need for jobs, particularly in Indiana. In northeast Indiana we've lost a lot of manufacturing jobs. Over 100,000 jobs have disappeared over the last few years and over 15,000 have been lost in the Fort Wayne area to China in the last few years. As a result of that, our society and kids are going to have to learn new skills and trades other than just maintain a factory job. This produces a lot more pressure on educators because now we have to teach not only the best and brightest of our young kids to think critically to speak and

read well with understanding and comprehension, but for the first time in perhaps American history we really have to teach the masses to do high-skilled work if they are going to survive economically in this society. So I think in the K–12 school, the way it is structured, there isn't time to do research. There isn't time to reflect as there should be. I think the university with its resources to research and reflect can be a good synergy with public schools if the university is working closely on a daily basis.

Barry: You mentioned the issue of diversity in your school population. You also mentioned the economic hardships. How do you see that as being related and how do you see the university as having a role in supporting your school system?

Jeffrey: Unfortunately poverty seems to go to a greater extent and exists in certain groups in our community here. The economically disadvantaged consist of Latinos or African Americans, but also a lot of Caucasian children who are experiencing poverty too. I think economics and diversity are somewhat related. But I think these are two separate issues. All children need to learn and understand the cultures of other students because they are going to live and work in the adult society. A few years from now Caucasians will be the minority in our country and Latinos will be the majority. At the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) in San Antonio back in February, one of the key speakers indicated that now, for the first time, Marion County (which is in Indianapolis) has more Latino births than white. I think it is extremely important that kids learn to work well with all races, colors, creeds, cultures, and religions because that's what they are going to experience in their adult lives.

Barry: You know, you look at the university partnership with us, and we've coined the term a scholar-practitioner relationship. What does that mean to you as a superintendent?

Jeffrey: I like that term because I think it connotes two separate divisions but also connotes a partnership that needs to exist in a much closer format perhaps than what it has. But I don't want to sound critical because IPFW and East Allen have done well in the last few years in forming close alliances and relationships with faculty going into our school and working, and so forth. But I think that needs to expand far beyond where we are now. Certainly the practitioner will struggle with the everyday reality of having large class sizes, large numbers of students, trying to provide individualized education when the whole system is set up like a factory model with standardization, and so forth. The educators are struggling right now with all the demands of *No Child Left Behind* and PL 221 and the constant demand to improve. As a result, teachers just don't have a lot of energy and time to be scholarly. We are in the learning business so we have to have thinking people actively involved in our business. Our practitioners are so busy and so drained physically and emotionally at the end of the day, there is not enough time to be

scholarly, particularly given the fact that in many public schools, the issue of discipline, for instance, is becoming a greater and greater burden on the classroom teachers. So I think it's extremely valuable to have some time where the scholars can go into the classroom and observe some of the issues and problems classroom teachers are facing and take that information and reflect and create and develop new synergy that doesn't exist right now. We've got to find a way to work smarter in our public schools to improve our services without burdening the classroom teachers with greater and greater burdens. We can't survive if we tell teachers, "Guess what? You get to work 80 to 90 hours instead of 60 hours." We're working them to capacity.

Barry: Do you think that teachers can work to capacity as intellectuals, as scholars?

Jeffrey: Could you explain?

Barry: Yes, sure. One could make the argument that teachers work as technicians and/or one could say that a scholar-practitioner is about a relationship between public school personnel including, but not limited to, teachers and university faculty as intellectuals, as coworkers.

Jeffrey: I think we're underutilizing the capacity of teachers as scholars, and if you're looking at that viewpoint, no, I don't think we are, but if you're looking at sheer time burdens and the emotion and physical drain of teaching, there isn't any capacity left to be scholars.

Barry: Where do you think the scholar-practitioner model can help?

Jeffrey: I think the scholar-practitioner model can help. I think it can assist both sides. When we're in a university classroom, we cannot teach in a void. We are teaching people who are practicing their profession, but we need to understand as professors and teachers what the current environment is, what they are faced with, what the current issues are, and they are changing. …It's not the same as it was 10 years ago. It's changing rapidly all over the country. I think that when faculty and teachers get immersed in the day-to-day affairs of the classroom, research can be reflected perhaps in creative ways hopefully without burdening teachers with more and more paperwork, and so forth. I think the teachers can benefit because they need some help right now. They need professors guiding them with new ideas into how to do better, how can we work better without working harder, and what some of the new research, what the scientifically based research is. Our people don't have time to do all that research, in terms of what is working best right now. …A lot of research is bad research to begin with. Trying to figure out what is quality research vs. some political agenda or

espousing someone's curriculum from a vendor is a real cause for concern. And then you get it in the classroom and you're thinking that this doesn't work like the research told me it would work. This is another real issue that is about finding reliable research.

Barry: Now there are some folk — scholar-practitioner professors who would argue that it is the teachers who are teaching us — the university folk — in public schools. How would you respond to that?

Jeffrey: The teachers are teaching the university staff?

Barry: That simply "us" going to get research or being in a position where research is acquired is really not what a scholar-practitioner model is about only. But that it is also about professional development for both the teacher, other public school personnel, and the scholar. That it is a co-relationship.

Jeffrey: I would agree with that. There has to be a synergy between the two sides and both parties have to benefit from that relationship.

Barry: Can you tell me…until now at least until your recent memory, what role does research play in your district?

Jeffrey: We have been heavily involved in the Learning Perspectives program. We've used a lot of Dr. Ruby Payne's research, particularly on efforts to close the achievement gap. A lot of that is about relationship building. We've concentrated heavily on that. That's been our main focus.

Barry: What kind of other research strands do you have in your district?

Jeffrey: Not much, and that's a real weakness in our district as well as all public schools or nearly all. Perhaps once you get to the larger school district there would be a research department, but very few schools have true research departments. We don't have any dedicated research department. We have an academic department that tries to keep up by reviewing literature and the trends and periodicals mostly, but we don't have a good research program. That's where I think the scholar-practitioner program can fill the bill. I am very familiar with most of the schools throughout Indiana, and the public isn't willing to pay for a research and development department. The public doesn't understand it, and trying to raise taxes wouldn't fly. There's a cry all over to cut administrators. They say schools have too many administrators. Well, the politics aren't there to establish, at least in a district our size, a research and development department. Yet we should have three or four full-time research and development people. We don't have any.

Barry: As you proceed with this new journal, what do you hope this journal can achieve?

Jeffrey: The first thing I hope it can achieve is a readership level. I think it has got to be a readable journal. I think it's got to be one where the classroom teacher can pick it up and say, "Aha, I'm understanding this." And let's be candid. I think that most of our teachers as well as our administrators are very limited in their research skills. If it's written as a research paper, a lot of our teachers aren't going to fully comprehend it. So I'm hoping it will be scholarly but yet use a discourse that classroom teachers and practicing building-level administrators particularly can relate to and understand.

Barry: What areas of research would you like to see operated on as we proceed in this journal? What are the things of interest to you in your district?

Jeffrey: Research on closing the achievement gap, particularly with minorities. We have someone in our school district doing a Ph.D. on an eighth grade African American male population achievement. We need that kind of study desperately. We need a lot of stuff on what's the best way to teach reading, what's the best way to teach writing. Where do we have the most success? We need some sophisticated program development evaluation. For example, reading recovery. Does it produce good results? And what's the cost-benefit ratio? Is it economically feasible? We need to find out what is the best way, the best methods to teach. Is there a better way to produce higher academic achievement for kids?

Barry: One argument in the field is that the scholar-practitioner model isn't about just what works, so to speak, but really about what is meaning.

Jeffrey: What it means?

Barry: If I were to make the argument that the scholar-practitioner isn't about building a quick factory, here's what works, but really is an analytical discussion on meaning making, how would you respond to that?

Jeffrey: What's the meaning of learning?

Barry: What's the meaning of learning? What's the meaning of culture? What's the meaning of diversity? What's the meaning of rural vs. suburban achievement? Those sorts of questions. In other words, there's literature about using NCLB as a way to standardize public education into a factory model.

Jeffrey: Yes, very clearly it is beginning to do that. We have a national curriculum essentially from that.

Barry: The scholar-practitioner model may take a stance that challenges that.

Jeffrey: Oh, I think that's wonderful.

Barry: What does that mean to you then if it challenges that?

Jeffrey: Now you're into my area — public policy. Should we have an NCLB act? I think all those kinds of issues would be wonderful to deal with. Even though they don't directly effect how a teacher teaches in the classroom, teachers are very concerned about those issues and very upset about what's going on in their profession. I would endorse that full heartedly. I would like to see the journal expand beyond the best way to teach, to talk about the profession too: what's changing in teaching, maybe some futuristic thinking. What should the profession in 10 or 25 years look like? Where's the profession heading? Are we heading towards privatization? Are we going to have Sylvan Learning Centers on every street corner? Is that going to be the future of public education? Are we moving to cottage industries?

Barry: How do you think the scholar-practitioner can challenge that discourse in a very practical sort of way?

Jeffrey: I think you challenge discourse by doing the research, surveying the field. But I think you have to do some longitudinal stuff too, because what may be important for a sixth grader today, by age 26 he or she may have a different meaning of success…and knowing if they were adequately prepared by the public schools.

Barry: If you had your goals as a superintendent for research and the journal and given the short- and perhaps a longer-term goal, what would they look like?

Jeffrey: A short-term goal better be to generate interest in people writing articles and doing collaborative research. It needs to generate some interest in people reading the journal.

Barry: And a longer-term goal?

Jeffrey: A longer-term goal might be what you are talking about: establishing meaning and giving different ideas and viewpoints on the overall mission of the public schools. Should we direct ourselves another direction is one of the essential questions I think we need to start asking as a country. Is it time to rethink our school system structure? Is it time to establish a new governance structure?

Barry: Do you have any questions for me?

Jeffrey: What do you think the challenges are of the journal, immediate and long term?

Barry: I think that the immediate challenge of the journal is obviously to generate some interest in scholar-practitioner models and to find public school personnel who are willing to be professionally developed as action researchers with university faculty in a cooperative relationship, both locally and nationally. The long-term goals would be to create a public forum for diverse ideas on what the role of public education is and how scholar-practitioner frameworks can challenge some traditional ideas, such as standardization and strict forms of accountability, and ultimately discuss publicly what that would look like. Having a public debate over these long-term goals is enormous.

Jeffrey: I think that'd be great. That's my interest too.

Barry: Do you have any other questions for me?

Jeffrey: Do you think there would be sufficient interest not only by university faculty but also by teachers to invest in this joint partnership?

Barry: I think that part of the role of IPFW is to outreach beyond Fort Wayne, Indiana, to those people who are doing the collaborative research. Of course this journal will be about this issue. There are many fine people doing this kind of work nationally, doing action research and working publicly. I think there is enough interest to generate some good ideas.

Dr. Abbott, I want to thank you for your time, your collaboration, and ideas.

Jeffrey: It has been a pleasure.

The Scholar-Practitioner Model

Within the IPFW School of Education faculty ranks, we have been struggling for clearer definitions of the scholar-practitioner concept, both in theory and practice. Some leaders in this progressive education movement liken the scholar-practitioner to the struggle for social justice and democracy. Comments Jenlink (2005):

> The moral nature of the scholar-practitioner's work locates the work of schools in a broader social context…where intellectual activity takes place and is inextricably linked to broader social and cultural concerns (p.9).

The above comment necessitates that educators link all their practices to finding ways that force us to problematize the conditions of teaching that allow inequities to occur while concurrently searching for practical solutions to these issues. While the literature on social inequities in education is too large to engage in now, and while there are specific journals that deal with such issues in education — some more than others — this journal will attempt, as others haven't, to formulate a partnership between a school district and

a university that looks at many issues — not withstanding the social issues of justice, democracy, and care as they relate to classroom practice and school structures. What is clear from the dialogue, however, is the perplexing nature of what constitutes a scholar-practitioner.

Initially, to Abbott, the scholar-practitioner meant two separate entities (teachers and university professors) coming together to formulate closer ties. Pushed by Kanpol to build on this scholar-practitioner idea, Abbott remained in the everyday-world classroom of the teacher, regarding the time element and resources not there for teachers to conduct research. He challenged himself to look at the role of the university and public school partnership as one that can foster a co-relationship in which the development of knowledge is both advantageous for the everyday teacher and university professor as a form of professional development and as both equal and reciprocal in nature. Furthermore, Abbott concedes that a journal of this sort may confront the current national policies in place. What is clear from the discussion between Abbott and Kanpol is that this kind of journal — in which there exists a relationship between a university and a school district — can begin a partner dialogue that transcends the boundaries of one university and one school district and that may link scholars and practitioners into an ongoing and reflexive dialogue over common educational concerns.

One could argue, then, that like the preceding dialogue, the evolving nature of a *scholar-practitioner* takes on many meanings and develops many sides:

(1) It's a relationship between teacher and professor.

(2) This relationship makes life for the teacher easier by helping to articulate how to solve practical issues.

(3) This relationship depicts both teacher and scholar as intellectuals.

(4) It's a relationship in which both teacher and professor learn from each other as a form of ongoing professional development.

(5) The relationship between teacher and professor is able to illuminate local and national issues in education.

Additionally, the dialogue proceeded into such areas as this journal developing scholar-practitioner models that would be able to articulate:

(6) Futuristic endeavors in education.

(7) Policy issues that could articulate how schools can deal with a sustained public vision despite the accountability systems already in place.

The above two points necessitate for the editors in this journal that perhaps the core element within a scholar-practitioner framework can be articulated — one which was hinted at for sure, but not dealt with at expressed length in the dialogue between the superintendent and the dean. That is:

> (8) The scholar-practitioner works within schools to both understand and sever injustices that occur at a daily basis — issues such as race, class, and gender disparities. Other issues such as accountability systems already in place working against teacher creativity, stereotypical depictions on what counts as success, and so on and so forth, seem to be a part and parcel of what constitutes a scholar-practitioner. Additionally, this journal will be open to scrutiny on what counts as a scholar-practitioner on multiple theoretical fronts.

With the above in mind, as this journal proceeds, we expect that the nature of what constitutes a scholar-practitioner will evolve and develop. We certainly do not want to be locked into one particular definition, but we are adamant that this journal begins a discussion between the practicing teacher in the field and the university professors who join in the classroom — through both teaching and research. A criterion for this journal will be an engagement in the dialogue about educational issues with public school personnel and university professors. Coauthored articles between these colleagues are necessary if we are to promote budding school-university partnerships, particularly scholar-practitioner sorts of activities and theories. We will not limit ourselves solely to coauthored articles, but we also realize that the nature of this journal and its beginning roots are formulated in partnership style, in which we believe that knowledge reciprocation between public schools and universities is critical to changing school systems.

We will insist that this journal is readable in the sense that all constituents in both public schools and university settings can gain something that informs their respective and ongoing practices and that wide readership can be met.

With the above in mind, in this inaugural edition of *scholarlypartnershipsedu* we will present for your review four articles coauthored by a faculty member and a practitioner in public schools. The first article by Suzanne Soohoo and Chris Strople is a reflection on how both professor and teacher learn from each other's experience. In the case of Strople, the search is how to find a research question to study in practice. In the case of Soohoo, the question she asks is how the teacher-researcher approaches the identification of that research question. Their journey is one of mutual discovery, as the emerging themes of "politics, pragmatics, and passion" raise their head both in their daily practices and ongoing journey of self-discovery. Perhaps even more important than how to discover a

research question is the realization that they can continue to be "critical" friends as they develop a professional relationship across institutional boundaries.

The following two articles present a dialogue about the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education. Alice Merz and Matt Glover form a unique partnership. Merz does the interviewing of Glover and identifies stories from the interviews. In the interview process and following, Glover was to verify and elaborate on the story's construction where possible. The stories emulate the ongoing struggle to insert a specific approach into teaching in an early childhood setting. The strength of Merz and Glover's relationship is their ongoing hermeneutical understanding of the Reggio approach, as well as contemplating that particular theory of early childhood education in the context of the school's rich history. In the following article, Denise Jean Cross and Terri Jo Swim collaborate in an action research project to investigate children's learning — children who came from a more well-to-do home environment vs. children who came to school with more needs. Using the Reggio approach to childhood education led the authors to try to abandon categories to define students — whether they were categorically defined as needy or not. Importantly, what we learn in this article is that inspired by the Reggio approach meant, in part, abandoning as best as possible stereotypes of the definitions of "needy," "average," and "rich." In broad ways, Cross and Swim's argument is a call for a reflective hermeneutics over our own biases and a call for an understanding of what McLaren (1999) calls "student voice" — the ability to hear, contextualize, understand, and challenge those areas of oppressive stereotypes that may in the long run oppress the very students we say we want to aid. Cross and Swim's manuscript goes a long way to understanding this student voice, particularly in the context of a Reggio Emilia philosophy of early childhood education.

The final article, coauthored by Connie Titone, Angelina Volpe Schalk, and Carol Gibson, involves an enlightening interaction between a professor and two doctoral students who work in public schools. The ensuing discussion around Mark Twain's controversial text, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* ultimately explores how community, such as our authors, can and should take leadership roles to help facilitate anti-racist attitudes and practices.

My hope is that the above conversations will both enlighten the reader as well as spur us all to action to explore ways to better our educational community. By this, it is my sincere sense that the coeditors of this journal engage in a sort of Freirian dialogue in which, as scholar-practitioners, we can reflexively engage in our practice, change or modify it where necessary, and continue to forge ahead to help alter and/or modify the institutions we co-serve for the betterment of the people we serve, namely the students we all teach.

Notes

[1]The term scholar-practitioner is typically linked to critical theory literature in education, as identified later in this manuscript. This journal, however, will use that term as related, but also in its constructive look to build on that concept as it relates to theoretical models other than critical theory in an effort to gain a far more eclectic view about how scholar-practitioners can come from multiple theoretical frameworks and experiences.

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